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THE LEATHER INDUSTRY AND THE TARIFF

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The leather industry is one of the industries of the United States that are victims, not beneficiaries, of the tariff. Shoe manufacturing is another. Agriculture, conspicuously, is a third. There are others.

Partly because of the abundance in our country of oak and hemlock bark and other tanning material, partly because of the enterprise and skill of our people, American tanners have been able, not only completely to hold their home market, but to export increasing quantities of leather to Europe. This they have succeeded in doing notwithstanding the handicap imposed upon them by the tariff—a handicap now more serious than ever.

The leather industry has never asked for governmental favor. It has never demanded that the people of the United States be taxed for its benefit, but itself has been taxed and is now taxed by the tariff for the benefit of other and more favored industries. It has paid higher prices because of the tariff for its steel and copper, for building material, for machinery and tools, for oils and other minor articles used in manufacture. It has paid these taxes and all engaged in the industry have paid an increased cost of living by reason of the tariff without getting the slightest benefit in return. Added to this, our market abroad is diminished by the high tariff on foreign imports, which prevents other countries from sending here commodities in return for which they would take increased quantities of our leather and also increased quantities of our boots and shoes.

Notwithstanding the double detriment to our industry worked by the tariff, until a decade ago no protest or complaint had gone up from leather manufacturers. The protective system in an extreme form, had been adopted by the government and was accepted by them as part of the established order of things. The injustice and injury to their particular business was borne in silence. But when, in 1897, it was proposed in the Dingley tariff to assail us

with a duty on hides, the raw material of our industry, the leather people thought that it was time to protest. A delegation went to Washington and appeared before the ways and means committee to remonstrate against the imposition of this duty. They told how, not only the manufacture of leather, but cattle raising, had expanded and reached to foreign markets during a quarter of a century of free hides. They showed that the United States produced and could produce only about two-thirds of the number of hides required by our tanners, necessitating large imports of them; that we should be at a great disadvantage in the hide markets of the world in competing with Canada and European nations, none of which imposed a duty on hides; that our growing export trade in shoes would be handicapped by the enhanced cost of leather. They pointed out that hides in relation to cattle were a by-product and farmers would get little or no benefit from the duty; that there had been no request for such a duty from cattle raisers, or, indeed, from any source so far as had been heard, and, finally, that it would be most unjust to the leather and shoe industries of the country, which then were receiving only injury from the tariff, to impose this additional burden upon them. The argument at the hearing was one-sided, no one appearing in favor of the duty, but the committee turned a deaf ear to the appeal of the leather men, and the odious tax was imposed. At that time Senator Hanna was in control. He had promised that "everybody should be protected," and no person in opposition to a duty had any standing at Washington.

During the decade since the imposition of the duty on hides it has been a constant and serious detriment to the great leather and shoe industries of the country, which employ so many thousands of men and so many millions of capital. The injustice and injury of this duty is deeply felt by all connected with the shoe and leather trades and is voiced at every meeting of their associations. A large delegation of prominent leather and shoe manufacturers appeared before President Roosevelt more than a year ago to invoke his influence with Congress in favor of its repeal, but without result.

By dint of great effort and with a minimum of profit on their exported products, the leather and shoe manufacturers have been able thus far to retain their hold on foreign markets. Their trade, however, with European nations is not increasing, and there is

danger of its diminution. Through the operation of the maximum and minimum tariff, our exports of shoes to Germany and France are likely soon materially to fall off unless our government responds to the overtures of those nations for some form of reciprocity. We can produce here a better quality of both sole leather and upper leather at a given price than can be produced in Europe. We are far more skilful in the manufacture of shoes. But, as President McKinley said, "If we will not buy, we cannot sell." We need reciprocity with the countries of continental Europe, with Canada and the South American Republics. A more liberal policy on the part of our government in the establishment of trade relations with other countries, which should result in increased interchange of commodities upon a fair and friendly basis of reciprocity, would tend greatly to augment our exports of leather and shoes, to the great advantage of those industries and to the benefit of the country at large.